Magiczny Kraków

The milk bars of Krakow

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The first milk bar called "Mleczarnia Nadświdrzańska" (literally: the creamery under the Świder river) was opened in Warsaw in 1896 by a dairy farmer called Stanisław Dłużewski. The name comes from the fact that the menu comprised primarily of milk-based and vegetarian dishes. Several decades later there were as many as 40 thousand milk bars in Poland.

Nothing has changed in decades in Krakow's milk bars. The menu still consists of inexpensive meat-free dishes and lunch bestsellers invariably include *pierogi ruskie* stuffed with potatoes and quark cheese, meat balls, *schabowy* (breaded pork chop) and *rosół* (chicken broth). A breakfast favourite is a bread roll with egg salad and a hot cocoa drink. You can get a two course meal with a *kompot* (stewed fruit drink) for 10 Polish zloty.

The mother of all Krakow milk bars was "Barcelona". This bar used to be owned by Celon Lustgarten, father of the famous Cracovia football player, hence people used to call it "bar Celona" – simply Celon's bar. Urban legend has it that it was here a lady behind the counter once unpretentiously informed a famous actor that his dish was ready to be collected: "A bouquet for the gentleman with one ball!" The dish was made of one fried egg (the Polish word for egg is also colloquial for testicle) with potatoes and a portion of boiled vegetables, often called "a bouquet".

The bar was built in the middle of the 19th century at the intersection of Piłsudskiego (former: Wolska) and Straszewskiego streets, nearby the National Academy of Theatre Arts and the grand building of Collegium Novum of the Jagiellonian University. The eatery, packed not only with students but also the teaching staff, was renowned for its tasty food.

The definition of a milk bar is very broad: "self-service, alcohol-free, public mass catering establishment dealing with the production and sales of milk and dairy-based as well as vegetarian dishes that are a part of daily meals.” It is worth visiting a few.

"Górnik" milk bar at Czysta 1 has only four tables. It is primarily frequented by students of the Agricultural University of Krakow and the AGH University of Science and Technology although the latter also eat en masse in the nearby Żak milk bar at Czarnowiejska street which is renowned for its *gołąbki* (stuffed cabbage rolls). Rumour has it that "Górnik" serves the best *mielone* (meatballs) in town. Suprisingly, the menu is meat-heavy: cabbage rolls stuffed with meat in gravy, chicken meat balls, pork neck in gravy, chicken stew, *brizol* (pounded pork or beef steak), but the famous "bouquet" of boiled vegetables is also available. Desserts include the ultimate milk bar classic: cream custard with raspberry syrup.

In the Grzegórzki district, Targowy milk bar is second to none. Located at Daszyńskiego 19, this establishment is famous for its *pierogi ruskie* as well as *leniwe* – quark dumplings, best with extra butter-fried bread crumbs and sugar. The long menu includes some unique items you will not have anywhere else: potatoe and cheese patties, Silesian dumplings with goulash, breaded salami cheese, *brizol* steak with creamy mushroom sauce and jam omelettes. The list of dishes also features a

chocolate custard and blackcurrant jelly.

In Podgórze, you can find great food in Południowy milk bar on Rynek Podgórski 11. Since the 1970s this bar has been run by two sisters – Ania and Jadwiga Moskała. The recipies have not changed in decades and culinary fads stay clear of this abode. By far the best dishes here are the vegetarian options including outstanding croquettes with egg salad and an all-time classic: pancakes with vanilla-flavoured quark.

After "Barcelona" closed down, the number one milk bar title was bestowed upon Północny milk bar in Howa Huta, at oś. Teatralne 11 located on the ground floor of the former Świt cinema. Classic Polish soups such as *żurek* (sour rye soup), *krupnik* (barley soup) or *rosół* cost as little as 3 zloty and seasonally available exquisite plum-filled dumplings or strawberry pierogi are no more than a fiver. Nowa Huta boasts about another bar located at Centrum C1. Some consider this Centralny bar as "legendary" just as the *pierogi ruskie* they serve there. The establishment seats close to a hundred people – after all it used to be a canteen for workers of the Nowa Huta steelworks plant.

Krowodrza district has their own milk bar as well: Flisak at Kościuszki 1. It is one of the few bars where you can try *zupa mleczna* (literally: milk soup) – a type of porridge with pasta or rice. In addition, the menu features a wide selection of *pierogi* and square pasta called *łazanki* with cabbage which is rather hard to come by these days.

Milk bars are sometimes unfairly considered the relics of a bygone era. A quick visit confirms that the locals come to these eateries in droves, regardless of their social or economic status. Additionally, milk bars play an important social role and are a stronghold of traditional Polish cuisine.